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WORLD NEWS

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Hong Kong leader demands end of independence talk, warns ties with Beijing at risk

Greg Torode, Venus Wu



HONG KONG (Reuters) - Hong Kong's leader urged an immediate end to independence debates in the Chinese-ruled global financial hub on Tuesday, warning that the issue was harming the city's relationship with Beijing's Communist Party leaders.



U.S. coronavirus death toll tops 10,000, the third highest in the world, according to a Reuters tally





FILE PHOTO: Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam addresses the Belt and Road Summit in Hong Kong, China September 11, 2017. REUTERS/Bobby Yip

Insisting that the government did not want to intervene on university campuses, Chief Executive Carrie Lam said the campaign was “organized and systematic” rather than simply an issue of freedom of speech.

“This has already deviated from the so-called, ‘Why aren’t we able to talk about this?’ point of view. It is clearly attacking ‘one country, two systems’ ... and destroying the relationship between Beijing and Hong Kong,” Lam said.

“It is not in the interests of Hong Kong’s development and must stop.”

Lam said the calls “violated” the Basic Law, the constitutional document securing Hong Kong’s broad freedoms of speech and assembly after Britain returned its former colony to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 under the “one country, two systems” banner.

While the Basic Law enshrines far broader civil and commercial freedoms than exist in mainland China, some legal experts warn that a sustained independence campaign could break laws against sedition.

Chinese leaders, including President Xi Jinping, have warned that independence discussions are a red line that can’t be crossed, saying the city is an inalienable part of China.

Some students have placed banners on “democracy walls” on campuses in recent days, sparking anger and counter campaigns from Hong Kong-based mainland students.

Some mainland Chinese students and pro-China patriotic groups have since sought to rip down some posters, sparking heated exchanges with Hong Kong students and free speech advocates.

Pro-independence activists should be “killed” and treated without mercy, Junius Ho, a pro-Beijing

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The widening controversy sparked criticism from Chinese state media, as well as a rare joint statement from the heads of Hong Kong universities, declaring that the universities did not support Hong Kong independence.

Lam said she believed university management would be able to handle the issue without government action.

Asked about Lam's warnings, Chris Patten, Britain's last governor of Hong Kong, urged greater efforts to engage Hong Kong's restive young people.

"It's unwise to think that you can simply shut it down by, and I'm sure Carrie Lam wouldn't suggest this, by locking students up," Patten told Reuters.

"These aren't people to be frightened of. They are the future. And you've got to persuade them why they're wrong."

While the students should "back off" counterproductive independence debates, he said, they should continue to push for democracy and the rule of law to secure their freedoms.



Slideshow (4 Images)

"This is an extremely moderate community," Patten later told a meeting at the Foreign Correspondents' Club. "If you give Hong Kong a bit more democracy, you've got to recognize that it's a moderate place and people will behave responsibly."

Patten was critical, however, of the Hong Kong government's decision to seek a resentencing of democracy activist Joshua Wong and others, calling it a "political decision" that should have been better thought out, given the criticism it provoked.

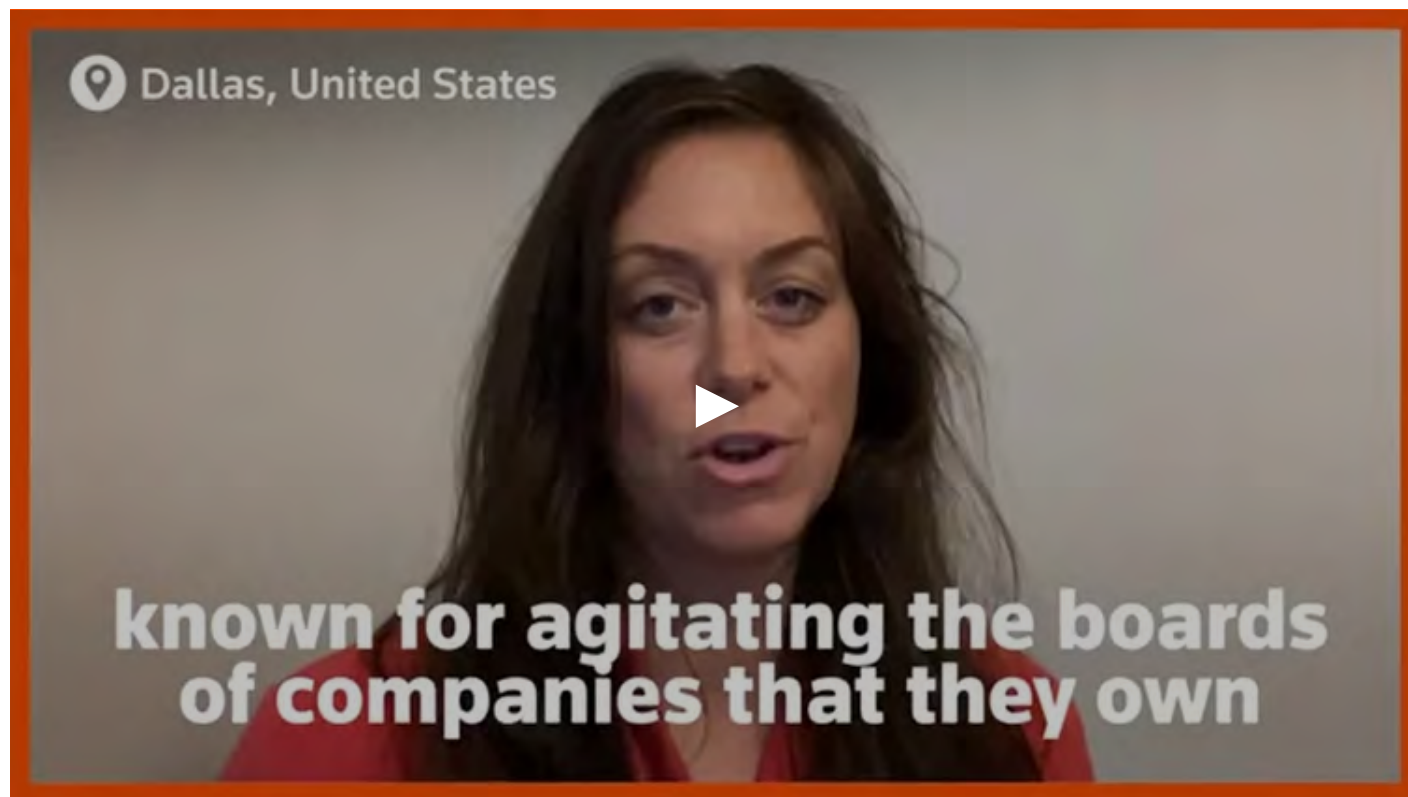
He also mentioned a Reuters report that Hong Kong's Justice Secretary Rimsky Yuen had overruled department colleagues in pursuing prison sentences for the democracy activists.

"He's a grown-up, he must know ... that actions have consequences," Patten added. "Not to understand what signal that would send to the rest of the world strikes me as being, to be frank, a little naïve."

Reporting by Greg Torode and Venus Wu; Additional reporting by James Pomfret; Editing by Paul Tait and Clarence Fernandez

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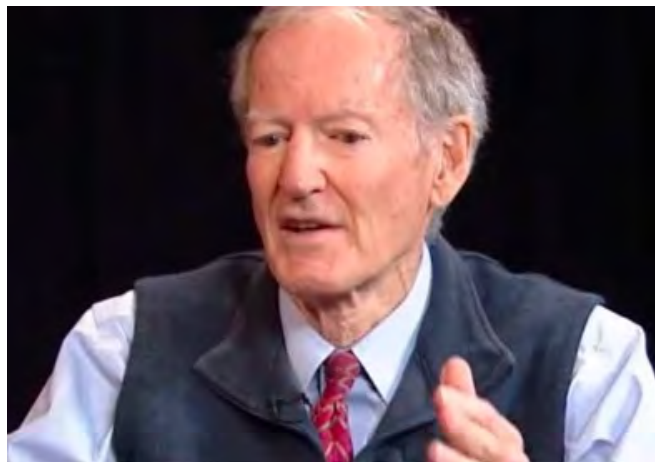


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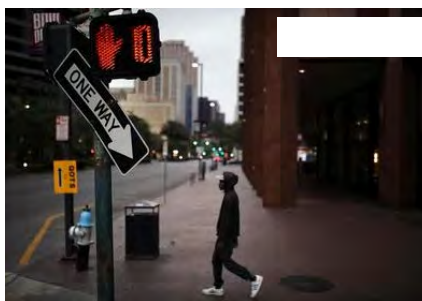
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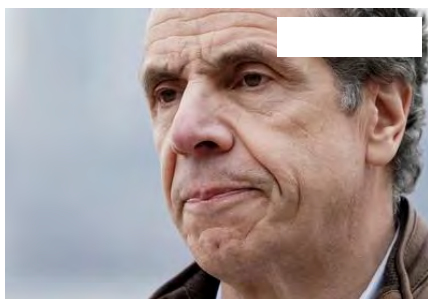
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